

## Going Straight // The story of a young man's struggle against his addiction to drugs Series: Going Straight

[CITY Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: DAVID FINKEL

Date: May 3, 1987

Start Page: 1.A

Section: NATIONAL

Text Word Count: 3136

---

### Document Text

---

First of five parts

Sitting tensely in a chair, he is a young man not to be messed with, a coil of barbed wire. His mouth is in a sneer. His eyes could burn holes. His name is Paul [REDACTED] and he's doing his best to look as if he's in control.

But in truth, he is just a 15-year-old boy with skinny arms, and when the clipboard with the admission form is handed to him, he begins to cry.

He is on the verge of entering a drug rehabilitation program called Straight, an intensive, high-pressure program that could take a year of his young life to complete. His parents think he has been smoking too much marijuana, and they want him in.

But he is scared.

He looks at the clipboard, and the words blur. He looks up, and there are his parents. His mother is crying. His father is biting his lip.

Already, they have heard their son admit he not only has smoked pot, but he also has swallowed speed, inhaled gasoline and toyed with the idea of shooting himself.

"You qualify for our program," Steve Knowles, an official with Straight, had said after the last of those revelations.

Now, motioning toward the clipboard, Knowles asks Paul if he is ready to sign himself in. He turns on a tape recorder. He asks Paul to read the admission form aloud. A few seconds go by, and then, in a voice that isn't much more than a whisper, Paul begins to read.

"I hereby give my volun ..."

The word is voluntary. But he can't finish it. His face contorts. Tears spill.

"I ain't gonna do this," he cries.

His father looks at him. "You got to," he says.

His mother looks at him. "You need to," she says. "We want to save you."

He begins crying harder. "I don't want to," he says. He buries his face in his hands.

The date is March 31, 1986. Outside the room, there is a refreshing breeze. Palms rustle, clouds float along, cars go by with windows down. For anyone else on the Suncoast, it is a beautiful, spring morning.

But for Paul and his parents, life on this day seems as terrible as it can get.

Discovering the problem

They come from St. Petersburg and Clearwater, from Pinellas and Hillsborough, from Florida and Texas and Michigan. A dozen times a month, 150 times a year, weeping parents and scowling children make a final attempt at reconciliation in a plain, warehouse-sized building in mid-Pinellas County.

This is Straight-Tampa Bay, a drug rehabilitation program where boasts of success are matched only by the notoriety of the methods.

The boasts: In six out of 10 cases, a defiant, drug-addicted teen-ager will be changed into someone who has given up drugs for the deeper pleasures of family, school and God.

The methods, at least initially: No living at home. No talking to parents. No contact with anyone outside the program. No drugs. No cigarettes. No TV. No music. No reading. No school. And a daily onslaught of counseling sessions that often reduces a person to tears.

Eventually, the person is allowed to read, does move back home, does return to school. But such things can take a year or more, all depending upon how well the person behaves as he progresses through the program.

“Drug treatment is different,” is what Bill Oliver, executive director of the Straight Foundation, says in defense of the methods. “This is not a normal world.”

The idea for all of this began in 1976, when Straight officially opened, taking up where another program called The Seed had left off.

Like Straight, The Seed was designed to end a young person's drug use through a lengthy, unrelenting program of peer pressure. It was disbanded, however, after an independently prepared report compared its methods “to highly refined brainwashing techniques employed by the North Koreans during the 1950s.”

Straight was intended to be a bit gentler than that, and, for the most part, it has been. Over the past 11 years, more than 6,000 people between the ages of 12 and 21 have been treated in a program that not only seeks to end an addict's drug addiction, but also to resolve the family problems that led to the addiction in the first place. “You are in the best drug rehabilitation program in the country,” parents are constantly told.

Still, Straight's record hasn't been perfect. There have been continual allegations of mistreatment over the years, including complaints of physical abuse, false imprisonment, brainwashing and cultism.

Many of these allegations were explained away as unfounded grudges; the program is radical, Straight officials say, and so complaints have to be expected. But some that couldn't be explained away turned into highly publicized lawsuits, one of which cost Straight \$220,000 in damages when a jury found a young man had been held in the program for several months against his will.

After that particular lawsuit, officials say, they modified some of their procedures. For a brief time, there was a noticeable dip in admissions, they say, but now enrollment is back up, and branches of the program have successfully opened in eight cities around the country, with five more in the planning stages.

Such dramatic growth isn't exclusive to Straight; these days, drug rehabilitation programs seem to be everywhere. Just in Florida, there are more than 200 licensed programs, according to state health officials.

But Straight, it seems, has always been the one to stand out. When Nancy Reagan wanted to visit a drug program in 1982, she chose Straight. When Princess Diana wanted to see one, she saw Straight, too. Countless articles have been written about Straight's unorthodox methods. A movie has been made. Much of the publicity has been negative, but through it all Straight has stayed in business, growing from a small program in St. Petersburg to one of the largest in the country.

Because of all this - the allegations, the lawsuits, the publicity - parents bringing their children to Straight often know of the problems of the past. Yet they keep coming, and no wonder: In a time when children as young as 8 are undergoing drug rehabilitation, the success stories of Straight can sound truly comforting to a parent who is desperate.

That's how it was for Paul's parents, Bill and Julie [REDACTED].

“I realize it's been a controversial thing,” says Julie. “I had some people tell me, ‘Your kid's going to come back like a zombie, he's going to be brainwashed, he'll be a religious freak.’

“But we heard the good things, too. And I think the good things outweighed the bad.”

In many ways, Paul doesn't typify the teen-ager who becomes dependent on drugs. There's no single, obvious problem that set him spinning off. What he does typify is the type of person that Straight tends to attract: white, middle-teens, a child of suburbia who grew up with most of the advantages. If there is a lesson in his drug use, it is that even in families where there is an abundance of love and the motives are good, things can still get out of control.

He was born April 2, 1970, Julie's second child, her first son. She remembers holding him just after his birth and feeling a rush of gratitude that he was so handsome and healthy.

“We have thought back: What didn't we do?” she says now. “Or what did we do that we shouldn't have?”

His early years, she says, were happy ones. When she divorced her first husband, Paul seemed to adjust easily. When she married Bill two years later and they adopted each other's children, he seemed to adjust again.

"Easy-going," is how she describes her little boy who imitated a TV commercial one day by climbing into the washer and staying there until she came looking for him. "Paul," she called, walking into the laundry room. The lid flew open. Up he jumped. "There's a giant in your washer," he said and dissolved into giggles.

Memories like those, she says, make it that much harder to understand the changes in him that began a few years ago.

In sixth grade, he gave up his old friends, the ones he had stuck with through thick and thin. In seventh grade, he began smoking cigarettes. In eighth grade, his grades dropped noticeably, and he was suspended from school for fighting.

He began taking things that didn't belong to him. Lighters disappeared. So did a pen knife. So did bracelets belonging to his sister, and \$134 in change that Julie had been keeping on a shelf. So did a gold charm he had given his mother for Mother's Day.

"You always blame me for everything," Paul answered when confronted. Indignant, he would storm out of the house - and then go off on his bicycle in search of more drugs.

Usually he bought them from friends. Sometimes he would make do with typewriter correcting fluid or gasoline. One time, in search of pot, he went to a rundown section of Tampa and gave \$20 to a street dealer who pocketed the money and then poured some spices and crushed leaves into Paul's hand. Paul tried to give it back, but the man wouldn't take it. Paul fished out a knife he carried with him. The man saw it and swung at Paul, and then Paul sliced him across his chest. He pedaled away fast, a 12-year-old with a bloody knife. He was scared - but not scared enough to keep from wiping the blood off, going to another part of town later and exchanging the knife for enough pot to last the rest of the day.

His parents knew none of this. They did know that their son was sometimes taunted because he was so skinny, and that he seemed to have an especially deep need for acceptance. Eventually they realized such needs can translate into drug use, but they didn't know for sure about Paul until the day when Bill, who was working at a laboratory, demanded a sample of Paul's urine, took it to work and ran tests on it.

After the test came out positive, Bill did another. After that one came out positive, things grew steadily worse.

Day-to-day life disintegrated into constant fighting. One weekend in Naples, Paul ran through a parking lot, bending and snapping off car antennae until the police finally cornered him.

Julie, who says she almost never hit Paul when he was a small child, still gets upset when she tells of walking up to him in the parking lot that night, looking at him, looking at what he had done and slapping him hard across the face.

And then his reaction: "He took it so lightly."

"He was really getting into it," says Bill. "I'd say the last month to two months, it was every day."

"I would say he put a very bad strain on our marriage," says Julie. "It was constant arguing. About school work. About going out. 'You can't stop me from taking pot.' Bill and I were arguing, we hardly ever argue. I hated to be home."

"He was really getting bold," says Bill.

"Defiant," says Julie.

"I think he was asking to get caught," says Bill. "He knew he was going to get caught."

'I don't wanna do this!'

So they have come to Straight for help. They are a bit sickened by what they are doing, but they are more sickened by what their lives have become.

They sit in the office of Steve Knowles, who turns to Paul and says, "Paul, do you know where we're at?"

Paul shakes his head. No.

In fact, he doesn't. He thinks he is at a family counselor. He thinks he will blow this whole thing off in an hour and be back home in time to get high before lunch. He slumps in his chair, one hand resting on a Walkman, which his parents gave him the day before as a three-day-early birthday present. He is a bit high from some marijuana he smoked just after he woke up.

"I'm going to be up front," Knowles says. "You're at a program called Straight."

Paul says nothing to this. But his muscles immediately tighten, and his expression goes hard. He stays this way, taut and unmoving, as Knowles explains that Paul's parents think he has a serious problem with drugs.

"Do you smoke pot?" Knowles asks him.

Paul nods.

"How much?"

"Whatever I can get," Paul says.

"Are you comfortable with me asking these questions?" Knowles asks.

Paul shakes his head no. And his eyes suddenly become wet.

Thirty minutes go by. "He thinks we can't tell when he's on pot," says Bill, "but he comes in with his eyes bugged out and shiny."

An hour goes by. "People have told me it's gonna kill me," Paul says. "Well, it hasn't killed me."

Ninety minutes go by and two young men already in Straight are escorted into the room. Ricky, who says he has "done pot, alcohol, ups and downs," tells Paul about the program, which lasts a minimum of 178 days. Then Matt - "pot, alcohol, acid, mushrooms, cocaine, ups, downs" - recites the rules:

No TV, radio, reading. No makeup. No jewelry. No dating. No hitchhiking. "No druggie friends or hangouts." Knock before entering a room. Spend nights at the homes of others in the program. "Hang on tight to newcomers by the belt loop."

Paul sits wordlessly, a blank wall. He gives no indication whether any of this is sinking in. There is a long silence. "The end result," Knowles finally says, "is you qualify for our program."

He hands over the clipboard with the admission form on it. He mentions that if Paul doesn't sign himself in, his parents could seek a court order forcing him in. Paul looks at the admission form and begins to cry. He says he wants to go home. He says, "I have to go in on my birthday almost? My birthday? Today?"

"Yes," Knowles says.

"I'd like to have a birthday," he says, almost pleading.

"That's why we had your birthday yesterday," Bill explains to him.

"And he didn't even want to be there," Julie says.

"You have to be strong, Paul," Bill says.

"I'm strong, but I don't wanna do this."

"You have to," Bill says.

"Would you just try it, Paul?" Julie says. "Please? Would you do it for me?"

Paul shakes his head no. "It ain't hurting me, so I'm gonna keep doing it."

"Paul, it is hurting you," his mother says. "It's hurting you at home, it's hurting you at school, it's hurting you in the fact that you're losing good friends."

"If you sign this, you're in control," Knowles says. "If you do it through the courts, you lose some of your rights."

"I'd rather you sign the paper yourself rather than we go to court and ask them to put you in here," Julie says.

More silence. They have been at this for two hours now. Julie fights tears, and Paul hides his face in his hands.

"We'll be right behind you," Bill says.

Paul doesn't move.

"Okay?" says Julie, who sounds as if she won't be able to hang on much longer.

"Okay?" says Bill. He leans forward. He pats Paul on the knee.

"Please try it," Julie says. She is begging.

Paul looks up and picks up the clipboard. Slowly, he reads aloud what it says, that he is entering the program without coercion. Julie finally loses her fragile balance and begins to weep. So does Bill. Paul reads on. He picks up a pen and signs his name at the bottom of the form.

He is in.

"I'm going to ask you to give your cigarettes and your tape player to your mother," Knowles says.

"I don't get to smoke?" Paul asks, incredulously.

"Do you want me to take his watch and rings, too?" Julie asks quickly, avoiding Paul's question.

"I don't wanna stop smoking!" Paul yells.

Knowles motions for the cigarettes.

"I don't wanna do this!" Paul yells.

Knowles keeps motioning.

"Goddamnit!" Paul yells. He takes the cigarettes from his pocket and throws them at his mother. She flinches when they hit her. "Goddamnit!" he yells again. He takes the tape recorder and throws it at his father.

"Here," he screams. "Take everything you ever gave me!"

He gets up. So do the two boys already in Straight. They grab him by the belt loops and lead him out the door, leaving Bill and Julie wondering if their son will ever find it in his heart to forgive them. Next: Fifty days away from home

#### About Straight

Eleven years after it opened in St. Petersburg, Straight has become a national drug abuse program with eight branches in seven states and five more branches planned. As of April 1987, more than 6,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 21 had been admitted for treatment. Here is a list of the branches and their current enrollment figures:

Straight-Tampa Bay (pictured above) Date opened: September 1976 Enrollment: 112 Straight-Atlanta Date opened: August 1981 Enrollment: 77 Straight-Cincinnati Date opened: January 1982 Enrollment: 78 Straight-Greater Washington D.C. (location: Springfield, Va.) Date opened: October 1982 Enrollment: 249 Straight-Orlando Date opened: June 1985 Enrollment: 90 Straight-New England (Boston) Date opened: December 1985 Enrollment: 151 Straight-Detroit Date opened: January 1986 Enrollment: 100 Straight-Dallas Date opened: June 1986 Enrollment: 114 Plans call for branches to open in Los Angeles and Seattle in late 1987 and in St. Louis, Chicago and Norfolk, Va., in 1988.

#### About the series

This series was begun 16 months ago when officials of Straight, responding to a request from the St. Petersburg Times, consented to allow a Times reporter to follow a person through its drug-rehabilitation program. Among the conditions agreed to by Straight were these:

The Times would choose the person to follow.

The Times would have unrestricted access to the person.

The Times would be able to follow the person's progress from the moment he first entered the program.

Times reporter David Finkel sat in on several admission interviews before Paul [REDACTED] and his family were chosen on March 31, 1986, to be the subjects of the series. While keeping continual track of Paul's progress, the Times decided not to publish any stories in the series until he had left the program so as not to interfere with his chances for success.

#### [Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, (4); BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, Bill Serne; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, (2); Straight Inc.: 87; Caption: Paul [REDACTED] on admission to Straight Inc.; baby picture of Paul and sister Jodie; Paul, age 12; Paul, age 8; Straight-Tampa Bay branch; Julie [REDACTED]; Bill [REDACTED]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

---

#### Abstract (Document Summary)

---

Sitting tensely in a chair, he is a young man not to be messed with, a coil of barbed wire. His mouth is in a sneer. His eyes could burn holes. His name is Paul [REDACTED], and he's doing his best to look as if he's in control.

Now, motioning toward the clipboard, [Steve] Knowles asks Paul if he is ready to sign himself in. He turns on a tape recorder. He asks Paul to read the admission form aloud. A few seconds go by, and then, in a voice that isn't much more than a whisper, Paul begins to read.

Usually he bought them from friends. Sometimes he would make do with typewriter correcting fluid or gasoline. One time, in search of pot, he went to a rundown section of Tampa and gave \$20 to a street dealer who pocketed the money and then poured some spices and crushed leaves into Paul's hand. Paul tried to give it back, but the man wouldn't take it. Paul fished out a knife he carried with him. The man saw it and swung at Paul, and then Paul sliced him across his chest. He pedaled away fast, a 12-year-old with a bloody knife. He was scared - but not scared enough to keep from wiping the blood off, going to another part of town later and exchanging the knife for enough pot to last the rest of the day.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.